

LOUIS LECOIN: AN ANARCHIST LIFE

Sylvain Garel

Anarcho-Communist, Anarcho-Syndicalist, Anti-Militarist, but always involved in social struggles, Louis Lecoin's life presents the map of a journey through the French Anarchist movement for more than half a century.

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Translated by Paul Sharkey

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What is Anarchism?

Anarchism is a political theory which opposes the State and capitalism. It says that people with economic power (capitalists) and those with political power (politicians of all stripes left, right or centre) use that power for their own benefit, and not (like they claim) for the benefit of society. Anarchism says that neither exploitation nor government is natural or necessary, and that a society based on freedom, mutual aid and equal shares of the good things in life would work better than this one.

Anarchism is also a political movement. Anarchists take part in day-to-day struggles (against poverty, oppression of any kind, war etc) and also promote the idea of comprehensive social change. Based on bitter experience, they warn that new 'revolutionary' bosses are no improvement: 'ends' and 'means' (what you want and how you get it) are closely connected.

Introduction

“I’ve been an anarchist since 1905, and if death comes soon, let me assure you that I will be dying an anarchist.”¹ Lecoin penned those words on the eve of embarking upon the hunger strike to press for conscientious objector status. He was then 74 years old. Ever since his first contact with political activity, Lecoin had always held that he was an anarchist. Some called him an individualist, others charged him with reformism. But there is no document and no testimony to call his libertarian convictions into question.

On the other hand, his relationships over upwards of half a century with the organised anarchist movement underwent considerable change over the years. What a difference there is between the secretary of the Anarchist Communist Federation (FCA) in 1912 and the splendid isolation of his last campaigns!

Excepting one study by Maurice Joyeux which came out in 1971², nobody has looked into this rather essential aspect of Louis Lecoin’s life. Lecoin himself, in his autobiography³ scarcely dwells upon the matter. Which leaves the primary sources: which are numerous: articles by and about Lecoin carried in the libertarian press, in his own review *Défense de l’Homme* and his newspaper *Liberté*. Several books on anarchism have also furnished us with priceless information.

1. An Exemplary Militant

Prior to his arrival in Paris in 1905, Louis Lecoin scarcely stood out from the other children in his native village, Saint-Amand-Montrond (in the Cher department). Like most of them, Louis never missed a chance to watch the parading regiments as they passed through Saint-Amand. Indeed, at the age of 16 he even speculated about a military career. Luckily, he had to wait until he turned 18 before he could enlist. In the meantime he made a decision that was to turn his life around: he would leave for Paris..

Equipped with a school certificate and a diploma in agriculture, he secured a job with a nurseryman in the southern suburbs. He worked twelve hours a day for poverty wages. Contact with foreign workers awakened his political consciousness. He discovered Zola and various aspects of the social movement. The Courrières disaster which claimed upwards of 1,000 lives on 10 March 1906, merely made him even more of a rebel against society.⁴

Then a gardeners' strike erupted. Naturally enough, Lecoin joined his comrades in direct action: the glasshouses and cold frames paid the price. When the strike finished, he looked for another employer and found work with some horticulturists.

On 1 May 1906, Lecoin arrived in the Place de la République, several hours ahead of the start of the demonstrations. Unhappily for him, at ten o'clock in the morning, he was arbitrarily rounded up along with some others and taken to the Château d'Eau barracks. Held until that evening, he was denied the chance to take part in one of the biggest riots the capital had ever seen.

In those days he was a reader of *L'Humanité* and attended socialist rallies against the Moroccan expedition. During one such rally Jaurès spoke. Lecoin was disturbed by the great public speaker's charm and eloquence. A bit of an eclectic, he attended an anarchist lecture on "the death throes of the old Christian world" some time later. The speaker was Sébastien Faure, the indefatigable anarchist public speaker. Lecoin thereby made the acquaintance of one of his greatest influences. The following day, during a demonstration by gardeners in the 16th arrondissement, the police charged. One arrest was made: Lecoin. To make matters worse his pockets were stuffed with handbills and pamphlets that he had picked up after the meeting the previous night. He was sentenced to three months in jail for assaulting the police and especially because the judge took him to be an anarchist. Out of bravado, the injustice of

this made him scrawl “Long live Anarchy!” on his cell walls. Earning him a further four days in the cells.

On his release, he meant to join the Socialist Party. But the electioneering of Jaurès’s friends and association with anarchist gardeners changed his mind. From then on he was a regular at libertarian meetings and devoured numerous anarchist works. On 13 October 1909, Francisco Ferrer, the Catalan libertarian educationist, was gunned down in a ditch on Montjuich (Spain). This monstrous execution triggered a tide of mass protests across Europe. In Paris the demonstration was held in front of the Spanish embassy. The crowd overwhelmed its stewards and barricades were thrown up and a municipal policeman was killed. Lecoïn was to the fore. At a second demonstration, he came across a reporter from *L’Humanité*, Robert Lazurick, a fellow native of Saint-Amand-Montrond. Lazurick told him that he had been due to report for induction into the 85th Infantry since 1 October!

Lecoïn was torn: should he serve the militarists or dodge the draft and be forced into exile? The latter would put paid to his continuing his propaganda activity. So he showed up, two months late, at the barracks in Cosne, determined to refuse to carry out any assignments that conflicted with his ideas.

Scarcely had Lecoïn joined the ranks than he was having a captain transferred for sadism and then was thrown into the glasshouse for eight days for refusing to abide by the orders of an alcoholic corporal. His military service might have been uneventful, had the rail strike not erupted a few months before he was due for discharge. On 17 October 1910, Lecoïn’s company was deployed against the strikers. He asked to speak to the captain and told him emphatically that he would not be used as a strike-breaker. He was immediately removed to the glasshouse. Three weeks later he was committed to prison in Bourges pending a court martial!

Lecoin stood up to the pomp and ceremony and his lawyer Maître Dupré reminded the court that clericalist officers had been acquitted and he asked for clemency. The court determined otherwise and Lecoin was sentenced to six months in prison. His action and the trial made front page news in all the newspapers, from L'Echo de Paris through to Le Libertaire, where Eugène Peronnet, secretary of the Social Defence Committee closed a lengthy article with these words: "If the thought should occur to the imprisoned Louis Lecoin that his splendid gesture may bear fruit and that he might arouse the conscience of the soldiery, well! his captivity must be sweet to him and he must feel himself ready to repeat the act.

Because he is man, because he did what his conscience dictated, they put him in prison, but what matter prison beside the boundless joy of having done his duty, all his duty? How splendid private Lecoin must find his cell!"⁵

As for Gustave Hervé, he penned a superb article for *La Guerre Sociale*, an imaginary dialogue between private Lecoin and the ghost of Tolstoy. Which is how the anarchist milieu first heard tell of Louis Lecoin.

Having served his time, he was returned to the 10th Infantry in Auxonne in April 1910. This time he was not asked to intervene against the striking wine-growers of Champagne not the Montceau miners. He came within an ace of serving a further term of imprisonment: along with several friends, he had plastered the barracks with anti-militarist stickers. He came under suspicion but they had no proof, so he was seconded to the 13th Infantry in Décize where he completed his service without mishap.

On his return to civvy street some comrades found him work in the building industry. Having embraced libertarian theories once and for all, he determined to play an active part in the anarchist movement.

In March 1912, Louis Lecoïn joined the Foyer Populaire de Belleville, one of the most active groups of the Anarchist Communist Federation (FCA). Since its first congress in June 1911, the FCA numbered sixteen groups and 400 militants, most of them anarcho-communists. It published and distributed the newspaper *Le Libertaire*.

Lecoïn brought to the anarchist movement the kudos of his activity during his military service. He very quickly acquired a grounding in libertarian ideology, thanks to help from Pierre Martin, secretary of *Le Libertaire*. This erstwhile colleague of Louise Michel made a strong impression on the young militant: “I retain loyal memories of my friend Pierre Martin, my mentor and example.”⁶

Such was Lecoïn’s activity that in October 1912 he was elected FCA secretary. The election to a position of such responsibility of a militant who had joined the movement a mere six months before demonstrates “that self-organisational incapacity that is one of the features of French anarchism prior to 1914.”⁷ The choice of Lecoïn provoked some objections from the sages of the organisation; this new secretary could just about read and write but was largely ignorant of the works of anarchism’s major precursors!

Luckily, with the world war approaching, it was time for action rather than discussion. Lecoïn was involved in frantic anti-militarist activity. He organised meeting after meeting, launched countless initiatives and sold up to three hundred copies of *Le Libertaire* every week. While working on building sites for ten hours a day.

Furthermore, Lecoïn and the FCA membership would heckle meetings by Gustave Hervé and Miguel Almereyda. They could not stomach the neo-patriotic propaganda being peddled by these two former libertarians. Meetings often ended in fisticuffs, if not with shots exchanged!

Lecoin's all-out commitment led to his coming to police attention. On 15 November, he was arrested for having printed a poster inciting desertion.⁸

The FCA promptly launched a campaign to secure Lecoin's release. Pierre Martin wrote in the CGT's daily newspaper: "Men like Lecoin cannot long remain free, because they are creatures faithful to their convictions and who abide by their principles in everything thing they do."⁹

Enjoying the benefits of political status, Lecoin set about studying the works of the great libertarian theoreticians. For him, prison became, as Jules Vallès put it, a great people's university.

On 19 December 1912, together with his co-accused Ruff, he was sentenced to five years in prison: the maximum sentence. When the verdict was announced, they shouted out "Down with war! Long live Anarchy!"

The long-anticipated war broke out. To the great shame of libertarians, mobilisation proceeded smoothly. The still imprisoned Lecoin had the painful news from Pierre Martin. The FCA no longer existed, most of its members having answered their mobilisation orders or fled into exile; only about a dozen comrades were still calling to the offices of *Le Libéraire*! As for the movement's leading lights, they had fallen out over which stance to adopt vis à vis the war. Sacred Union or resistance? Kropotkin, whom Lecoin regarded as "anarchy's finest theoretician"¹⁰ had opted for war on Germany and put his signature to the "Manifesto of the Sixteen". The anarchist movement failed to withstand the test of war. Lecoin tasted his first great disappointment. Others would follow.

In November 1916, Lecoin was released from prison. Pierre Martin had just died. On 3 December, within days of his release, Lecoin attended a meeting on the premises of Sébastien Faure's newspaper CQFD (*Ce qu'il faut dire* - What Needs Saying). He took the anarchist orator to one side and chastised

him for continuing to bring out his newspaper in spite of its being censored and of going too easy on the socialists and the government “on account of his ties to non-anarchist parties and connections.”¹¹ Alfonse Barbe, a deserter at the time and a witness to the argument, reports: “Sébastien Faure, whom he accused in the presence of a hundred libertarian comrades of not only betraying peace but of having sold out to the government on the basis that Malvy, the Minister of the Interior, had warned Sébastien Faure to cease his pacifist propaganda, because the lives were at stake of a number of soldiers in the trenches, anti-war tracts signed by Sébastien Faure having been discovered in their packs; confronted with this tragic situation and his own responsibilities, Sébastien Faure had agreed to call off his peace campaign; and it was for this humanitarian gesture that Lecoïn attempted to upbraid the latter, although the gathering listening to the debate did not follow suit.”¹²

Later, Lecoïn came to regret his accusations: “My youth, my impetuosity, my lack of experience made me unfair to the man in whom I vehemently criticised what I termed his culpable delicacy with regard to ‘war-mongering anarchists’”.¹³

Back in jail again for refusing to answer the draft, Lecoïn and other political prisoners in La Santé drafted an underground edition of *Le Libertaire* in June 1917, as well as a later manifesto - which may well have been the first of its kind - supporting Lenin’s maximalists.

After the signing of the armistice, *Le Libertaire* resumed publication from January 1919. Lecoïn, still behind bars, wrote for it right from the first editions under the nom de plume of Léonic. Cognisant of the ineffectuality of the movement in 1914, he wrote an article entitled “Let’s get ourselves organised”, calling for the establishment of an anarchist organisation.¹⁴

His opinion carried some weight with the libertarian movement. Lecoïn was a martyr whose release had to be secured. *Le*

Libertaire carried out a campaign on his behalf and published a pamphlet.¹⁵ “For us young libertarians and young syndicalists, Louis Lecoin had become an example to be imitated. He had shown us that it was possible to be at once a syndicalist, a libertarian and an anti-militarist.”¹⁶

Le Libertaire had to wait until the end of November 1920 before it could carry the three column banner headline “LE-COIN FREED”.¹⁷ He had just finished his eighth year in prison!

Lecoin’s release coincided with several changes inside the anarchist movement; the FCA’s replacement, the Anarchist Union (UA) had been set up on 15 November, Le Libertaire had expanded from two to four pages, and above all, French anarchists had begun to voice criticism of the Russian revolution. Previously libertarians had been among the most zealous defenders of the soviet Republic but the news percolating gradually through to them had opened their eyes to the chasm between the achievement of Lenin and Trotsky and the establishment of a libertarian society.

Lecoin immediately joined the Anarchist Union. Like most of his comrades, he had lost his illusions about the Bolshevik revolution. And when the revolutionary syndicalist Pierre Monatte, going over temporarily to Bolshevism, proposed to him that he join the Third International, he declined. For some years the Communist Party and the Anarchist Union made common cause against Poincaré, but the differences between them were too great and the break-down came when two libertarian militants were murdered at a CP rally on 11 January 1924. From that point on and right up until the day he died, Lecoin’s anti-communism never wavered. An article written in 1952 spelled out Lecoin’s main beefs with the CP” “At the end of the first [world] war, there was a chance, in spite of everything, that the anarchists might have their day in France. That was foreseeable given the failure of the socialists and syndicalists. But along

came the Russian revolution, with its upsetting and damaging consequences and it wrecked, ransacked and devastated those strata of the people from which our comrades might have been entitled to expect to draw their finest forces.

And the anarchists, instead of going on to the attack against the capitalist regime, were obliged to defend themselves doggedly against the encroachments of Bolshevism.

They did so with real brio and we owe it to French-speaking anarchists if the Bolsheviks met with relative failure in their venture to dominate the world of labour completely and internationally.

... Russia no longer represents the hope of a radiant future but has turned into what we were afraid of in its revolutionary beginnings (with the aid of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat') - a place of appalling tyranny."¹⁸

Lecoin was appointed administrator of *Le Libéraire* and of its bookshop in December 1920.¹⁹ He turned to Sébastien Faure with whom he had made his peace. Their collaboration was fruitful and helped to refloat the anarchist movement. Towards the end of 1921 news reached them of the death sentences passed on Sacco and Vanzetti: *Le Libéraire* broke the news to the French public. In January 1922 Lecoin took charge of the editing of the paper.²⁰ During this time his signature appeared on very few articles but numerous short reports seem to bear his mark. Six months later he stepped down from his duties at *Le Libéraire*. A boxed notice explained: "Our comrade Lecoin, having sacrificed all his time and the better part of his activity to editing *Le Libéraire* over many a long month has, of his own volition and to the regret of our comrades, decided to resign the secretaryship."²¹

There are several hypotheses about this retirement. The first is of a personal nature: in 1922 Lecoin was living with Marie Morand²² and his private life could no longer be reconciled with the ongoing burdens of editing *Le Libéraire*. Moreover,

Lecoin, now aged 34, had no doubt woken up to the ineffectuality of most of the campaigns carried out by *Le Libertaire*. Whilst not reneging upon his ideas, he was taking a step back in order to be in a position to intervene to greater effect. Not that he left the UA; it was merely that he was active along different lines and the criticisms were long in coming. Lecoin was henceforth no longer the “exemplary militant”.

2. On The Fringes of The Organisation

At the end of 1923, *Le Libertaire* became a daily on the strength of the Philippe Daudet affair. Although preoccupied with imprisoned militants and although he contributed to the fund-raising that the launch as a daily required, Lecoin held aloof. No doubt in order to spend time with his wife and their daughter who was born on 3 June 1924 in Paris. “from this point on, Lecoin was no longer one with the anarchist organisation. He was alongside it! He canvassed its support for his campaigns and he might even canvass his opinion which he might espouse or not. He was on the margins.”²³

In October 1926, the UA asked Lecoin, who had been a member of the organisation’s steering committee since July, to look into the fate of Sacco and Vanzetti on the one hand and that of Ascaso, Durruti and Jover on the other. Finding the Social Defence Committee run by libertarian militants too narrow and ineffectual, Lecoin launched the Right of Asylum Committee (CDA) to forestall extradition of Ascaso, Durruti and Jover. He also launched the Sacco-Vanzetti Committee. Lecoin was secretary to both bodies.

If he was to save the two Italian-American anarchists from the electric chair, he needed backing from all of the personalities of the day. This approach drew criticism from certain UA militants who called for the establishment of another committee “to work towards the rescue of our two comrades whilst preserving their dignity and the purity of their anarchist ideas,

free from unwholesome compromises.”²⁴ Lecoin recalled that “one of these ‘purists’” penned a ridiculous, not to say despicable, poem in which there was scant regard shown for the lives of Sacco and Vanzetti: “‘what matter death? Long live death!’ it said, or something equally asinine.”²⁵ As for the Communists, they accused Lecoin of collaborating with the bourgeoisie and being a freemason. This charge was taken up by the Action Française. Lecoin, however, unlike many anarchists, was at no time a member of a masonic lodge.²⁶

The criticisms had little impact upon the Sacco-Vanzetti Committee which threw itself into a more massive campaign of rallies and demonstrations.²⁷

At the UAC congress in November 1927 a few militants returned to criticising the activity of the Sacco-Vanzetti Committee. In the end, a motion was passed: “Have listened to explanations of the activity and propaganda on the behalf of Ascaso, Durruti, Jover, Sacco and Vanzetti. The Anarchist Communist Union endorses what was done.

In future the Anarchist Communist Union is too have its own prisoners’ defence committee. That committee is to be under the direct material and moral supervision of the UAC. It has been stipulated that the Defence Committee funds are to be managed separately and to have a separate secretary.

Apropos of alliances with outside parties, the UAC may well play a role in accordance with the general feeling of its groups and federations.”²⁸

In order to keep the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign going, some comrades asked Lecoin to launch a committee against the death penalty. But he needed the rest and stepped down.

Meanwhile a contest had erupted within the libertarian movement, between synthesists and platformists. Although he “had misgivings about frictions between committees whether in majority or in the minority holding up decision-making”²⁹ played a significant part in this controversy.

With encouragement from the Russian exiles Makhno and Arshinov, the platformists were advocates of a “powerful anarchist organisation, united in terms of ideology and tactics”³⁰ and wanted to differentiate themselves from individualists. The synthesists found such a line to be at odds with the libertarian ethic and tradition and reckoned that all three anarchist strands (anarcho-syndicalist, libertarian communist and individualist) could co-exist and arrive at a synthesis.

The UA congress in Orleans on 12, 13 and 14 July 1926 managed to avert a split between the two schools of thought. A manifest was issued, reaffirming the synthesists’ line whilst making concessions also to the platformists. The UA became the UAC (Anarchist Communist Union). In an article in *Le Libertaire*, Lecoin congratulated himself on the triumph of unity.³¹

But the boil had not been lanced; the Paris congress (30 October to 1 November 1927) set the seal upon a rupture between the two currents. The platformists, who were in the majority, took control of the UAC which underwent a further transformation into the UACR (Revolutionary Anarchist Communist Union). Three schools of thought surfaced:

“1) A majority current which, rejecting the incoherence and dispersion of effort resulting from irresponsible individualism, reckoned that activity by its groups or isolated members could only be effective if it were in tune with the organisation’s ideology and overall tactics..

2) A minority current which, although at odds with the new line which, they maintained, breached anarchist principles, decided to remain in the organisation in order to defend these against their detractors.

3) A breakaway current, in agreement with the minority on the defence of anarchist traditionalism, but refusing to have any further truck with an organisation that they found akin to a party.”³²

Lecoin backed the second of these currents and stayed in the UACR, in spite of the departure of Sébastien Faure to launch the AFA (Association of Federalist Anarchists). For a year, Lecoin waited in the wings and played no part in the Amiens congress in August 1928, even though he was elected on to the Steering Commission. Watching the UACR grow weaker, Lecoin and some synthesist comrades launched an offensive with an eye to the April 1930 congress. They demanded that the congress be open to subscribers to *Le Libertaire*, as well as to Faure's AFA.³³ The platformists refused; Lecoin returned to the attack and forced a vote on the matter.³⁴ The Steering Commission decided to throw the congress open.

Lecoin and thirty militants then published a "Manifesto of the Communist Anarchists,"³⁵ in which they reaffirmed anarchism's basic principles, rejected the idea of a post-revolutionary army and called for anarchist unity. Lecoin drafted one fifth of the text and he took it upon himself to collect signatures from supportive militants. This undertaking made him a target for the platformists: "Lecoin and his tendency think they can overrule some with this sort of psychological intimidation which betrays an intransigence reminiscent of the Bolshevik leaders."³⁶

During the congress, Lecoin enthusiastically championed the principles of the "Manifesto". Autonomy for the groups was reaffirmed and the synthesists carried the day. Sébastien Faure resumed his collaboration with *Le Libertaire* and in 1934 the AFA rejoined the UA.

During the congress, Lecoin spoke up in defence of conscientious objection against the platformists: "The entire beauty of an act resides in individual acts. It is such acts that have made us known to and beloved of the people."³⁷ Yet Lecoin had not always been of this mind. Like most anarchists in the wake of the First World War he was still opposed to conscientious objection. Libertarians refused to ask the State for

the right not to wage war and preferred to look to the insurrectionary strike in the event of mobilisation. At a Peace congress, 17-22 August 1926, organised by the Christian Youth, he has flayed conscientious objectors, and a month later drafted a lengthy article on the subject: "Comrades from the *Le Semour*³⁸ tendency waged, especially in that paper, an enthusiastic campaign to get those who govern us to recognise conscientious objection, which is to say, the legal entitlement of the 'conscientious objector' to be spared the dangers of killing or being killed in war-time should evidence be adduced by himself and witnesses that prior to the war he was profoundly opposed to war.

An extremely dangerous, vilely selfish and plainly anti-revolutionary position.

Anarchists, who do not divide their fate from the people's fate, will not for anything in the world agree to gag themselves and will not have at any price an official exemption that would place them on the side of the officers in the greatest of crimes."³⁹

But, like most of his comrades, Lecoin had gradually woken up to the actual impossibility for anarchists of turning war into revolution. And when his friend Pierre Odéon refused to report for duty as a reservist in December 1929 and was arrested, Lecoin leapt to his defence in *Le Libertaire*: "Odéon knows very well that the social question, upon the solution of which we were working, will be resolved only by revolution. But I do not think that, while we wait for that revolution, there is any prohibition on the individual's taking action in accordance with his tastes, strength of will and make-up."⁴⁰

Unity achieved, Lecoin stepped out of the limelight again. He had become an "exceptional" militant intervening only when events required that he should. Right up until the outbreak of the Spanish civil war he took little to do with the life of the libertarian movement. He preferred to devote himself to

defending the many political exiles from within his Right of Asylum Committee. He canvassed support from numerous celebrities and supported voting in favour of a law offering protection to refugees. Such activities earned him the respect of the various foreign libertarian communities which had settled in the France of the time. They also earned him severe criticisms from certain UA members. The Marseille Anarchist Action Group asked for.. “the abolition of the Right of Asylum Committee which is a group whose principles and methods are at odds with anarchism’s overall principles.”⁴¹ Lecoin ignored them and carried on as before.

Come General Franco’s uprising on 18 July 1936 Lecoin rejoined his comrades. French anarchists identified with the FAI and the CNT, the mighty Spanish libertarian trade union.

“I know Spain inside and out and I have not ceased being concerned about what is happening down there since I was twenty years old, since I took part in the unforgettable Paris demonstration on the day of Francisco Ferrer’s execution.”⁴²

Lecoin had to wait nearly twenty years before he again took a hand in Spanish political life; in 1927, after a long and difficult campaign within the Right of Asylum Committee, he thwarted the extradition of Ascaso, Durruti and Jover, famous Spanish libertarian militants. A stay in Barcelona following the proclamation of the Republic on 14 April 1931 merely added to the fascination with the country. He saw 100,000 people marching behind the black and red banners of the CNT-FAI. His account in *Le Libertaire* was enthusiastic.⁴³

The front page headline in *Le Libertaire* of 31 July 1936 read: “The Spanish Revolution is Our Revolution!”⁴⁴ Immediately, French anarchists of every persuasion set up an “anarcho-syndicalist committee for the defence and liberation of the Spanish proletariat”. In September 1936 a hundred French militants formed the Sébastien Faure centuria which set off for Spain to fight as part of the Durruti Column. In October, the

Anarchist Union (UA) charged Lecoin and a few others with launching the CEL (Free Spain Committee).

The CEL's support for working class Spain was both political and material. The CEL held numerous meetings and solidarity demonstrations drawing personalities of every hue. The main aim of all this agitation was to induce the Popular Front government in France to send equipment and arms to Spanish republicans. When it was not heeded, the CEL dispatched the material itself..

Three and sometimes five 4 or 5-ton lorries were driven to Barcelona every week by two militants. They carried bed-clothes, medicines and food as well as concealed arms and munitions. Nicolas Faucier recalls: "I can just see us back then at the Flobert armoury up by the Boulevard Saint-Michel, trying to buy arms and munitions (bought by the subscriptions raised) and the means to get them to their destination. Moreover, we acted as guides for Spanish comrades in search of the same goods and in the Rue de Crussol⁴⁵ we had an arms dump that was regularly restocked and ferried by our lorries down to the fighters in Spain."⁴⁶

In addition, the CEL welcomed 300 Spanish orphans, mostly evacuees from Barcelona and Madrid, to the Ascaso-Durruti colony in Llensa, near the French border.

In June 1937, the CNT and the General Workers' Union (UGT), the socialist trade union grouping, decided to launch International Antifascist Solidarity (SIA). This alliance was Spanish anarchists' and socialists' way of reacting against more sectarian mutual aid groups, especially those under Communist control. At the start of November, the UA commissioned Lecoin and Faucier to turn the CEL into the French branch of the SIA. Whereupon they came up with this characterisation of the new organisation: "International Antifascist Solidarity has been set up to afford help to the victims of world fascism, but, for as long as events in Spain remain as they are ... International An-

tifascist Solidarity will be dedicated solely to the defence of Workers' Spain.”⁴⁷

SIA met with considerable success. Its first rally in December 1937 attracted 10,000 people and a handbill of which 60,000 copies had been printed was soon exhausted. Within months of its establishment, the SIA was claiming a membership of 30,000, split up into 25 branches.⁴⁸ Even if these figures were artificially inflated for propaganda purposes (Jean Maitron speaks of 15,000 members⁴⁹) there is no denying that it gained considerable strength by turning itself into a movement of solidarity with anti-Francoist Spain. For nearly a year the SIA published a two-page bulletin (one page in French, the other in Spanish) as an insert in *Le Libertaire*. Lecoin, the SIA secretary, felt that the UA mouthpiece's audience was too narrow and he launched a weekly newspaper S.I.A. on 10 November 1938. Written in three languages (French, Spanish and Italian) the paper had 55,000 subscribers by February 1939. Fearing the competition, officers of the UA had opposed the launch of S.I.A. Instead, the new title reached out to a much wider public and attracted new readers to *Le Libertaire*.

During the war in Spain, a controversy erupted over the sort of support that should be fed to the CNT-FAI. The UA afforded the Spanish anarchists unconditional support, but some numerically less significant libertarian groups were critical of certain positions of the CNT-FAI leadership. Especially the Spanish libertarian trade union organisation's support for the republican government. “As for the SIA's solidarity activity vis à vis the fighters in Spain, this held clear of the squabbling racking our movement over whether or not collaboration in government should be. Our view was that, whatever the mistakes certain leaders may have made (and we did not omit to convey our fears to them, man to man, or when we would invite them to take part in our rallies or on our visits to Barcelona) we would be compromising our efforts by voicing criticisms or public

charges against comrades embroiled in the struggle against the Francoists and who were being stabbed in the back. And, to be sure, this was not to the liking of our movement's purists who were, for all that, quite rare and who did not stint in their carping about us."

1939 was a landmark year for the libertarian movement. The collapse of the Spanish anarchists in March and the outbreak of the Second World War in September devastated the libertarian movement. Anarchists had long been alive to the approach of war but they were conscious that their meagre resources could not prevent the eruption of hostilities. In April 1938, at the request of the UA, Lecoin and Faucier set up the Trade Union Anti-War Action Centre. The rallies they organised did not meet with the expected success. The war arrived, *Le Libertaire* was censored and then seals were placed upon the UA premises. Most French anarchists chose an individual solution; they went into exile, dodged the draft or reported for front-line service while hoping, somewhat disbelievingly, for a revolutionary upheaval. Lecoin and Faucier alone attempted pacifist action. Ten days after war was declared, the distributed 100,000 copies of a handbill called "Immediate Peace". Lecoin and Faucier were arrested and virtually nothing more was heard from the French anarchist movement until the Liberation.

3. The Loose Cannon

During the war what remained of the libertarian movement fell apart. Some were impelled by their opposition to the Communists to go over to collaboration, whilst others joined the resistance. A handful of draft-dodgers and deserters went to ground or to prison. Only country gatherings could muster a few militants. It was not until 1943 that the first contacts were established; a meeting was held in Toulouse, followed by a second in January 1944, to finalise the principles of a new organisation. An initial congress was held in October 1945 and a na-

tionwide conference that December gave birth to the Anarchist Federation (FA). It brought together the “survivors” from the fraught years of the Second World war and some newcomers to anarchism.

Lecoin remained in prison until 1941. Drained physically and psychologically, he had no connections with the small core of active militants. Most of them, belonging to a different generation from his, were critical of the methods he had employed in his various inter-war campaigns and of his “passivity” under the Occupation. “A few had been, I will not say, cast aside but rather overlooked when it came to the invitations to help rebuild the libertarian movement and among these were Le Meilour, Lecoin, Loréal. etc. A few years later, many of them, who had been involved in the trade union movement or the Anarchist Union, came to see me in my bookshop in Château des Brouillard. From them I heard the sorry tales of men who had made poor choices, who had merely been ill-advised or had made do with keeping their heads down in times of universal fear! In Paris as well as in the provinces, it was Anarchist Union militants who had fared the worst.”⁵⁰ Which accounts for Louis Lecoin’s absence from the foundation gatherings of the FA in 1945.

Around this time he wrote his first set of memoirs: *De Prison en prison*⁵¹, the first edition of which came out in December 1946. Publication of the book led the FA organ *Le Libertaire* to bring up Lecoin’s name again for the first time since the war had ended. An article there heaped praise upon his activity but recalled the criticisms voiced about his methods.⁵²

Lecoin, waiting in the wings, grew bored. He was itching to get involved again and since there were too many points of difference between him and the FA he decided to act alone, as a loose cannon. He gathered a few friends around him and published a monthly review entitled *Défense de l’homme*. Its ob-

ject was to leap to the defence of the individual wheresoever his freedom was in jeopardy. The first issue appeared in October 1948. Lecoin affirmed an anarchism tinged with humanism. *Le Libertaire* was scathing about the venture.. “Too many tired old clichés. Not enough passion. Maybe this comes from so many disillusioned chums having written this edition.

The review *Défense de l’homme* appears to have sacrificed too much to its desire to see the writings of its friends in print. If Lecoin starts down that road, there is more to come..”⁵³

The article reviewing the second issue was more moderate and the editors of *Le Libertaire* answered a number of readers who had found their previous criticisms a touch too pointed.⁵⁴ He may well have drifted away, but Lecoin appears to have retained the respect of part of the movement. Thereafter, the review was simply ignored by the FA’s mouthpiece.

In 1949 the Gary Davis affair pitted Lecoin against the Anarchist Federation. Gary Davis, an ex-serviceman, repudiated his American nationality and declared himself a citizen of the world. He launched a newspaper and a movement that called for world government as a means of averting further war. The FA offered critical support for the venture but reckoned that Gary Davis was not going far enough and that “only the FA is pacifist because it alone is revolutionary”.⁵⁵ When a young Catholic conscript was arrested as a deserter, Gary Davis spoke up for conscientious objection. He organised numerous protest rallies to press for his release. And was arrested several times. Lecoin set up and was the driving force behind the “Gary Davis Committee”. On 14 October 1949, at a rally chaired by Lecoin, André Breton, egged on by some FA militants, attacked Gary Davis. So much so that he was interrupted by Lecoin, which lead so some cat-calling in the hall. In the minutes of the meeting, Lecoin denounced the FA position. He made a particular target of Fontaine (the man who had been critical of the first edition of *Défense de l’homme* in *Le Libertaire*): “I cannot

say whether *Défense de l'homme* is particularly anarchist or not, but I do know this, comrade Fontaine, that your particular speech was not at all anarchist.”⁵⁶ The controversy and the campaign stopped right there, for Gary Davis had been deported from France and was quickly forgotten about.

One month later, in *Défense de l'homme*, Lecoin chastised the FA for doing a lot to talk down Franco but doing nothing concrete to oppose him. The Federation asked him to come up with action plans of his own. A Social Defence Committee was set up but it never really got off the ground, no doubt because of the weakness of the French libertarian movement.

The FA's Bordeaux congress in May-June 1952 signalled the beginning of the disintegration of the FA. A platformist tendency led by Fontenis took control of the organisation and expelled a number of its militants.

Lecoin called upon anarchists to unite, reminding of the time wasted on squabbles between individualists and anarcho-communists in the 1930s.⁵⁷ He suggested to the FA that it join with *Défense de l'homme* in launching a series of talks on anarchism by way of giving the libertarian movement a boost. He declared his own readiness to join the FA.⁵⁸ But his suggestion was not taken up and *Défense de l'homme* organised a few talks on its own. The rejection by the FA doubtless came out of the deep-seated disagreements between it and Lecoin over the wars in Indochina and Morocco. The FA supported the national liberation movements in both countries: in keeping with his pacifism, Lecoin was very severely critical of this stance which, he argued, was at odds with the libertarian ethic.⁵⁹ At the same time, the bookshop at *Le Libertaire* refused to distribute *Défense de l'homme* and *De prison en prison*, on the grounds that Lecoin was only a “paper-seller” and a one-time collaborator to boot. This was a serious charge, but hardly a new one. Some people read Lecoin's strict neutrality during the war as equivalent to support for the occupation. Cut to the quick, Le-

coin replied in these terms: "I challenge even those who bear me the greatest malice to produce one line, one word to demonstrate that I was a collaborator. It never even occurred to me to collaborate. From start to finish I have had only one preoccupation: peace."⁶⁰ After which correction, Lecoin had no further truck with the FA which then became the FCL - Libertarian Communist Federation in December 1953. The FCL faded away following its unfortunate participation in the elections of 2 January 1956.

Meanwhile, those expelled or dissenting from the FCL relaunched the Anarchist Federation in December 1953. Lecoin felt much closer to this synthesist strand of the libertarian movement and rejoiced in the tenor of the debates at its first congress.⁶¹ And when the new organisation opened a subscription to launch *Le Monde libertaire*, he called upon his own readership to make a donation.⁶² The first edition of *Le Monde libertaire* came out in October 1954, but in spite of his act of solidarity, it was five years before Lecoin's name appeared in its columns! As far as FA members were concerned (and it was the same for FCL members) Lecoin was an old man (he turned 66 in 1954) who had done much for the anarchist movement but whose future was behind him. The lack of success enjoyed by *Défense de l'homme* confirmed this view.

In a way, Lecoin momentarily proved them right by handing over responsibility for his review to Louis Dorlet in July 1955. Having grown weary, he preferred to take a back seat. Dramatic events put paid to his retirement: on 29 December 1956, his wife, Marie, died suddenly of an unexpected angina attack. Her death left Lecoin at a loss. To avoid sliding into melancholy solitude, he decided to launch a big campaign on behalf of conscientious objection. He immediately made contact with *Le Monde libertaire* to discover if they might collaborate on this. He suggested that the FA newspaper should become a weekly, the better to keep up with events and act as a

sort of loud-speaker on behalf of the objectors' campaign.⁶³ The FA declined, but invited Lecoin to join the editorial team of *Le Monde libertaire*. Lecoin was not prepared to make do with the role of an "also ran" and chose to launch a weekly of his own, *Liberté*, the first edition of which came out on 31 January 1958.

Right from the beginning of the campaign on behalf of conscientious objection, criticisms were voiced about the choice of personalities sponsoring the organisation "Help for Conscientious Objectors". Alongside a few anarchists such as Bontemps or Breton, they included the likes of Lanza del Vasto, the abbé Pierre and Pastor Roser. Which it facilitated more effective activity such eclecticism was not to the taste of all libertarian militants. From No 5 of *Liberté* onwards, Lecoin had to state that he was not about to renege upon his beliefs during the campaign.⁶⁴ In No 7, after asking the ill-intentioned and the skeptics to stay away, he explained in a long article why he had chosen to engage in concerted action with believers: "At bottom, is the difference between sincere Christians and anarchists all that important? It is less significant than we imagine and no more exists than it does between, say, an atheist and a believer, both of whom are conscientious objectors. Go ahead and - in times when peace is in jeopardy - differentiate between them when they 'come together as one' in a shared hatred of war.

Which is why, my wild-eyed anti-clerical, my unrepentant old anarchist, I ventured upon this campaign on behalf of objectors with the as much enthusiasm as if it were the defence of members of my philosophical kin.⁶⁵ And those few readers who take me to task for the tolerance that allows me to recruit the irreligious and the religious for our sponsorship committee are wrong."⁶⁶

With the exception of reprinting, without comment, a letter from celebrities asking De Gaulle to set conscientious objectors free, it was nearly a year before *Le Monde libertaire* carried a

piece on conscientious objection.⁶⁷ And it was only when the campaign had met with a measure of success that, in November 1959, a wide-ranging debate on the matter got underway. Should they, or should they not, be asking the State for the right to refuse to wage war? As the months passed, the leading lights of the FA spelled out their position in *Le Monde libertaire*. Lecoin's activities had as many supporters as it had opponents among them.⁶⁸

Thereafter the FA organ carried occasional reports on the conscientious objection campaign but accorded these only secondary importance. This attitude was one that the FA maintained from start to finish of the campaign. Except in 1962 when Lecoin began a hunger strike to press for recognition of conscientious objector status. At which point the FA awarded Lecoin unconditional support, sticking up posters, taking part in demonstrations and making its premises available. Desrozier, one of the five people on hunger strike in solidarity with Lecoin was an FA member. Yet, less than a year later, in *Le Monde libertaire* an FA militant reasserted that he rejected conscientious objector status and had misgivings about the Christians backing the pacifists.⁶⁹ This view mirrored the outlook of a sizable section of the organisation which took the view that campaign for status was an "incomplete, mongrelly scheme" and the law, passed in December 1963 "an empty temple where the faithful come to make their devotions."⁷⁰

So why the backing in June 1962? The question is one worth posing. Roland Biard in his history of the libertarian movement states that "The lack of prospects cannot explain this support. Might the anarchist movement at that time have been prey to a certain personality cult where Lecoin was concerned? That hypothesis is not one that can be ruled out!"⁷¹ Whilst there is no denying that Lecoin commanded the respect of a goodly number of militants, this scarcely explains why the assistance from the FA was essentially confined to the hunger

strike period. Two other factors were at work. For one thing the repression which, as so often, had made the libertarian movement close ranks. In June 1961 a rally in support of conscientious objectors was banned by the prefect of police; immediately the FA shot off a protest telegram. In March 1962, the libertarian movement's headquarters were bombed by the OAS with plastique. Lecoin chaired the solidarity rally that followed. At it he delivered a vigorous speech in favour of unity: "The anarchist family is not so big that we can let it be decimated and mutilated and it is our duty this evening to join with each other in a formal pledge: that we will stand four-square behind one another."⁷²

Liberté donated a significant sum of money towards the reconstruction of the FA premises. When the hunger strike began, three months after the bombing, all of the conditions were in place for FA support (and we cannot be sure that Lecoin, every one of whose actions was planned down to the tiniest detail, had not had this in mind when he delivered his speech for unity). But it was above all because the whole affair had by that point acquired a high profile that the FA as well as other libertarians backed Lecoin. Back in the van of events for the first time since 1939, anarchists hoped to breathe fresh life into an organisation that had been stagnating for upwards of twenty years. And in order to achieve that they were prepared to set aside their criticisms.

Once conscientious objector status had been granted recognition, Lecoin refloated the Committee for Free Spain in January 1964. On this score he could of course rely upon FA support. The presence on the Committee of Maurice Joyeux, one of the libertarian organisation's leading lights, is telling. But the FA was rather lukewarm in its involvement in the campaign.

In Liberté, Lecoin kept up his appeals on behalf of anarchists persecuted in France and across the globe. In May 1968,

the expulsion order served on Daniel Cohn-Bendit prompted Lecoïn to write one of his most violent articles, entitled: “A Word to a Bastard”: “Mr Christian Fouchet, you are a despicable blackguard, well worthy of serving as commander-in-chief of the CRS and carrying out the duties of France’s Number One Cop.

It is your provocative and odious measure against Daniel Cohn-Bendit - and everybody acknowledges this, even deputy Terrenoire, an active member of the parliamentary majority - that gave rise to the violent demonstrations on Friday, 24 May and you have the neck to portray yourself on the radio like some plaster saint. Try as you will to prove your innocence, but we cannot endure your slobbering over others and brazenly taking it out on anarchists.

Hands off my comrades, Mr Interior Minister!

I have not been mandated to defend them and anyway they have no need of anybody. But I am part of their household, having been one of their number for upwards of sixty years now, which gives me the right to shout to you, Mr Fouchet that you are an arrant liar, a foul slanderer and that .. anarchists do not give a shit about you.”⁷³

Lecoïn was given to such “outbursts” right up until the end of his life, whether it was in 1970 when the Italian anarchist Pinelli “fell” from the fourth floor of Milan police headquarters, or in 1971 at the time of the Burgos trial.

Lecoïn’s last campaign for unilateral disarmament, even though it was reviving an old idea of Sébastien Faure’s, left the libertarian movement indifferent. Except for the FA’s pacifist wing, also active within the UPF (French Pacifist Union). Even so, Lecoïn kept in touch with the movement and a few months before he died, he was to have chaired an FA-organised rally to mark the centenary of the Commune: but, being sick, he had had to withdraw. His state of health also precluded his writing a book setting out his philosophical and political beliefs.

“Louis Lecoin is dead. A chapter in the history of this libertarian movement of ours has closed.”⁷⁴ This impression is confirmed by a reading of the libertarian press that appeared following Lecoin’s death on 23 June 1971. A quick check of fifteen anarchist magazines or newspapers adds depth to our analysis of Lecoin’s relations with and influence upon the various branches of the libertarian movement. Nine devoted one or more articles to the news. Only two articles out these articulated any criticisms of Lecoin’s activities. All the rest sang his praises, some extravagantly so. Not surprisingly we find that the platformist tendency (Guerre de Classe, Front Libertaire, Tribune Anarchiste-Communiste) utterly ignored the passing of Lecoin. By contrast the synthesists (Le Monde libertaire, La Rue) devoted one or more articles to it. As for the anarcho-syn-dicalist press, it paid tribute to Lecoin’s trade union activities.⁷⁵

On 29 June 1971, five hundred people attended Lecoin’s funeral at the Père Lachaise cemetery. Huddled around his family here were trade unionists from the CFDT and FO, pacifists and French or Spanish anarchists. Wreaths were sent from the Anarchist Federation, The French Pacifist Union, the Louise Michel Group, the World Citizens and Le Canard Enchaîné. The presence of personalities such as Bernard Clavel, Eugene Descamps, Yves Montand and Simone Signoret showed that Lecoin’s influence had extended far beyond the libertarian movement.

Conclusion

Ten years on from the death of Louis Lecoin, what remains of his activities? How have they withstood the test of time?

His name is still associated with the conscientious objector status passed in 1963. Whilst the law has scarcely altered since then, the objectors certainly have. Since 1968, believers have

accounted for only a minority of them. Georges Pompidou's endorsement of the Bregançon decree on 2 September 1972 tightened up the qualifications upon the status. In response, most objectors decline their reassignments and refuse to perform civilian service. In September 1974, the objectors/draft-dodgers set up the CLO (Objectors' Struggle Committees). The CLO see their campaign as part of a wider struggle against capitalism and the state and they reject any notion of civilian service. Others still repudiate what they see as the compromise involved in applying for status that exempts them from military service. Opting instead for "total non-compliance", they also question the hunger strike practice that Lecoin largely introduced to the anti-militarist movement. Paradoxically, the closer those refusing military service come to Louis Lecoin ideologically, the more they reject a status that he wrested with such difficulty and the more critical they become of some of his methods.

Lecoin's fellow campaigners can be found in two associations - the UPF continues to campaign for unilateral disarmament. The Friends of Louis Lecoin publishes a monthly bulletin *Le Réfractaire* which keeps the flame of Lecoin's other causes alive.

As for the anarchist movements, they scarcely mention Louis Lecoin. Except in historical articles in which they glory in his activity. Lecoin has been consigned to the anarchist pantheon alongside Louise Michel, Elisée Reclus and Sébastien Faure. Like them, his personality left a great mark upon the libertarian movement. Today the anarchist may still have his leaders, but the days of the sacred ogres who were once the movement's strong point and yet its weakness, appear to be long gone.

Appendices

today, unbowed
tomorrow ignoring the draft
and thereafter, deserter

Without consulting us, the State manipulates everything, our freedoms, our very lives, insisting that we go off to serve our murderous apprenticeship in arms, that we enter the barracks for two years.

To serve whom? Our fatherland: WE HAVE NONE!

We were not even “electors”. How could we have given our approval to the conscription law? Anyway, since every law is an impairment of freedom, we do not recognise the law, ANY LAWS.

We want to see weapons done away with and militarism done away with; we do not believe that by marching passively off to barracks we will encompass this aim. Instead, we protest most vigorously at this trespass against our freedom.

WE REFUSE TO GIVE WAY, WE REFUSE TO OBEY.

It is the duty of all Frenchmen to defend their homeland, we hear the exploiters of every hue exhorting us at every opportunity.

The propertied, the bosses and the great officials have a homeland: but what might we, the oppressed and the exploited have to defend?

The privileges of those who ensure that we go hungry? That would be too stupid by far!

WE UTTERLY REFUSE TO ACT OUT THIS FARCE, TO FORGE OUR OWN CHAINS!

We do not desert out of fear of the fighting or out of cowardice. If our brethren will but some day stand up at last to the Authorities in all their guises, we will be at the ready!

But today we cry out to the workers' sons and to all who ought to act in concert on the basis of their common interests.

DO NOT REPORT TO BARRACKS! DO NOT, BY YOUR PASSIVITY, CONTRIBUTE TO THE PERPETUATION OF THIS SCOURGE, MILITARISM!

DESERT!

(Anarchist Communist Federation (FCA) poster. Conscripts' Group. October 1912) Archives Nationales, F7 13061.

IMMEDIATE PEACE!

In spite of all of the efforts of honest pacifists, the blood is flowing. Even now nearly the whole of Europe is in the throes of war. The entire world is to be swallowed up by men's blood.

Everybody knows this, everybody feels it.

The infinite sadness of those mobilised and the heart-rending pain of their nearest and dearest are testimony to that.

No flowers in the gun barrels, no revolutionary singing, no cheers as the military set off. And we are assured that it is the same in every belligerent nation. And so, right from day one, war stands condemned by most of the participants, whether from the vanguard or in the rear.

So, let us quickly make peace.

Let's not wait until it is offered to us by the war-mongers.

The price of peace will never be as ruinous as the price of war. For nothing can be built with death; with life, there is everything to hope for.

Let the armies, in deference to reason, therefore lay down their arms!

May the heart of man seek its reward in a very rapid end to the war.

Let us cry out for peace! Let us demand peace!

Signed:

Alain, Victor Margueritte, Marcel Déat, Germaine Decaris, Félicien Challaye, Vigne, Georges Dumoulin, Georges Pioch, Lucien Jacques, Thyde Monnier, Giroux, Lecoin, Charlotte Bonnin, Yvonne and Riger Hagnauer, Vives, Marie Lenglois, Robert Tourly., René Gerin, Maurice Wullens, Henri Poulaille, Marceau Pivert, Zoretti, Georges Yvetot, Jeanne and Michel Alexandre, Robert Louzon, Hélène Laguerre, Emery, Henri Jeanson, Jean Giono.

(From Nicolas Faucier *Pacifisme et Antimilitarisme dans l'entre-deux-guerres (1919-1939)*, Paris, 1983, p. 193)

Louis Lecoin's Address to the CGT Congress in Lille, 1921

Lecoin: - Friends, I am greatly afraid that this debate on trade union policy may be pointless and let me explain why.

If, as in the days before the war, we were here at a confederal congress, tendency versus tendency, honest intentions versus honest intentions, if we were militants who had respect for one another, we could certainly get a result and rest assured that we as revolutionaries would prove to you that there is an urgent necessity for us to revert to the revolutionary syndicalism of before the war, for the sake of the working class of this country and for the sake of the working class around the world.

But as long as we must suffer the shame that we do and as long as the organised working class of this country must endure the shame it does, which is to say, for as long as the CGT is headed by men who have the past seven year record of renegadism that we know about, there is no possibility of our reaching agreement on a possible trade union guideline. And the first

thing to do, your very first move comrade delegates to this congress, is to clear out the Augean stables and spew out the people who, since 1914, have failed to live up to all of the motions passed by preceding congresses.

Let me explain: at previous congresses Jouhaux and his accomplices have lamented the fact that no one has cast up to them, in congress, what was written down in the press or said at public meetings.

For my part and on behalf of all my anarchist comrades, I am casting up to Jouhaux and his accomplices on the CGT Bureau everything that may have been said about them and even everything that we may have forgotten to say. And let me add that these are not insults nor calumnies: they are words of truth, earned by the whole harmful conduct of the CGT secretary and his adjutants. (Some applause).

In the course of the proceedings, speakers have stated that once and for all, congress decisions must be abided by. Well now! Let us see how the men in charge of the CGT have abided by congress's decisions.

Let us remember and let us remind those who are too newly come to the trade union movement: Jouhaux took over the CGT secretaryship from Mr Niel, a notorious reformist. Mr Niel had, by surprise, by a freak vote, been elected secretary of the CGT. A vote had been passed and had to be abided by. Whereupon Mr Jouhaux and his friends waged against Mr Niel a campaign of denigration, slander and lies. (They must have been slander and lies as far as Niel was concerned). Let me add that I myself must have been in agreement with Jouhaux at that point. But a vote had been passed. Jouhaux and the others should have abided by it. They so little abided by it that after two months of such a campaign, Mr Niel was obliged to tender his resignation. Jouhaux stepped into his shoes and accepted the confederation's decisions against war, its anti-militarist resolutions, the motions that stated that should war be declared the

CGT was to call for an uprising, for revolution. And in 1914, what did Mr Jouhaux do? Did he not breach congress's decisions? They had been passed, he was the qualified official representative of the CGT and he ought to have abided by them. He did not.

There is a difference between the stance of syndicalism's revolutionary minority comrades and HIS attitude: the revolutionary syndicalists do not implement what they did not vote for. They vote against the keynote report and against a trade union policy that is not their own, and are quite entitled to engage in the requisite propaganda to push their own point of view. But when Jouhaux had accepted the motions that he had often tabled, he had no right to breach them. And you, comrades, when you seek to expel the minority because they do not enforce what they have never agreed to, you ought to make a start by throwing overboard those who have not implemented what they did vote for.

En route to here in Lille, I noticed the devastated areas. I had never seen the ravages of war at such close hand and I confess that I was moved by trees resembling telegraph poles, by the demolished houses and the thought of men laid out forever at the foot of these trees. And I thought about the purpose of my trip. I said to myself: "I'm off to the CGT congress in Lille and when I get there I'll be face to face with one of those largely responsible for the continuation of the war. And I glanced at one of those pre-war speeches. Listen, comrades, to this speech given in 1912 at the time of the Balkan war. At that time the French CGT was alive to the fact that war in Europe was inevitable; there was thought in those days of shifting the responsibility on to Germany as the only aggressor bearing complete responsibility for the war.

Listen to what Jouhaux said on Monday 25 November at an anti-war rally in Paris.

‘This evening, you have gathered here to put the finishing touches to the work of the CGT and its congress. You have come to demonstrate your willingness to get involved in its activities.

At present, the sky is heavy with clouds. Even the bourgeois newspapers have felt themselves obliged to state that Austria is starting to mobilise, that Russia is preparing for war.

We must, therefore, make the move that circumstances dictate. If we protest against war it is not because we fear it! No. We shall exploit the war in order to turn circumstances to the advantage of the working class.

Should war be declared, we shall refuse to man the frontiers.

But we shall not refuse to have recourse to class war, to the revolt which is the only thing that can set us free!

The 24-hour strike will be a warning shot across the bows of the government. If it carries on, then we shall give free vent to our wrath, to our hatreds and shall re-enter the fray in order to achieve our emancipation.

It may be said that the revolutionary general strike is a simplistic weapon.. We say that it is a modern weapon! We say to you: When the government gets around to issuing the summons, do not answer!

Make your way to your trade unions and your Bourses where you will receive whatever instructions the circumstances commend.’

And Jouhaux closed by crying out in a voice that drew enthusiasm:

‘Down with the capitalists’ war! Long live the class war!’

That is what Mr Jouhaux was saying prior to the 1914 war. You are familiar with his position. Is there a man who has fallen so far into ignominy?

To excuse him his friends have often told us: “But the mob was all for the war; the CGT bureau merely fell into line behind a working class that was clamouring: On to Berlin!”

Had there truly been working class enthusiasm for the war, I might have understood how the revolution could not have been unleashed just like that. But, between the position of unleashing a revolution and preaching a righteous war, a war for freedom, there is another position. There was the line of silence, and there was nothing in the world forcing Mr Jouhaux and the others to call for war when they had previously been condemning it. (Applause)

Let us be clear that there is a difference between those who endured the war and those who bragged about it.

At present, we are, all of us, enduring capitalist rule. But there is not one among you who would dare to sing its praises. The same line should have been taken with regard to the war, until such time as the opportunity and circumstances came about when pacifist propaganda could be carried out somewhat more easily, as certain people did.

I happened to be released from prison in November 1916. I was at large for a fortnight. During that time I had occasion to bump into Dumoulin at the offices of Ce Qu'il Faut Dire. He himself was home on leave from the front. He was what he had been before the war. We talked about the line of his former colleague Jouhaux. I can still remember our conversation and I am going to rehearse it for your edification and to show you what Jouhaux's motives were in going over to the righteous war camp. We shall see if Mr Jouhaux was devoted to the working class and if he made sacrifices for it.

Dumoulin told me (and, assuming he has not lost all sense of shame, I would ask him to say if I am not telling the truth):

"I will readily go and bid old Calveyrach good day. You know, he signs all the CGT Bureau motions, but he is a good fellow, except for one thing. But I am afraid of coming face to face with that fat pig for I should feel obliged to spit in his face."

Then, at 8.30, we bumped into each other again in a cafe along with some friends. This time we conversed at greater length. We discussed the war together. Dumoulin no longer had his pugnacious attitude he possessed before the war and today. He was rather spineless. Understandable. He was in the trenches, having lost confidence in the working class and was at somewhat of a loss. But I bucked him up. (Laughter) I said to him: "Listen, you didn't turn traitor, you are enduring the war. Trying to struggle through, trying to avoid being killed, there is nothing wrong with what you are doing (Dumoulin had been telling me that they had offered him a place in the rear, had he wanted it, but that he had chosen to run the risk of war rather than dishonour) that's fine, and when you return from the war, you, whom we love and who did not go over to the war, you can in fact help us to expose those who so shamelessly betrayed the interests of the working class" And then we chatted and we wondered:

"What made Jouhaux do it? What was his motive? He has sold out, and how! He has sold out, won exemption from the draft and had his life spared because of this treachery and that is a real sell-out.:

He said to me: "There may be something else to it. I am going to tell you something that will enlighten you." And he told me that during the week leading up to the war, during that week of turmoil on the CGT Committee which was meeting regularly at 33, Rue Grange-aux-Belles, during that week, there was no hint of support for the war on the CGT Bureau. It might have been regarded as inevitable, that there would be no revolution and that, damn it, they should be taking precautions and making ready to flee the country and leave France. A ship had been put on stand-by somewhere and, when the time came, Jouhaux, Dumoulin and the rest were to have boarded that ship and left the working class to cope for itself.

It was Dumoulin who told me this. It was not a pretty story and such an attitude was none too brave, but it was less sordid, less vile than what followed. There they were in that little room, chatting with one another, looking at one another rather uneasily, wondering if the time had come to clear out and catch that ship, when a lawyer showed up at the premises. Dumoulin told me: "This lawyer was an agent of the government; on entering the premises the lawyer said this to the members of the CGT Bureau there present: 'You know that there is nothing you can do. The government has its eye on you and at the slightest sign of anything, the merest act of sabotage at all, you are to be arrested and you may well pay with your lives for anything that happens. You have only one course open, namely, to go see Malvy. He will see you and it may well be to your advantage.'"

Those present delegated Jouhaux to go see Malvy. Back comes Jouhaux from seeing Malvy. Everything had of course gone swimmingly for there was that speech made at the graveside of Jaurès, the advocacy of the righteous war, etc.

Such, according to Dumoulin were the reasons why Jouhaux was induced to leave the working class in the lurch and turn into a rampant patriot.

You wouldn't want me to step down from this rostrum without saying something about the grave matter concerning us.

You upbraid the syndicalist minority for wanting to make the unions subordinate to a political party. Allow me to read to you part of the resolution passed recently at the minority's congress, by some 1,000 unions:

"In keeping with the Amiens resolution, Congress takes the view that syndicalism is, in terms of its origins, character and ideal, a revolutionary force: it again affirms its complete independence of political or philosophical groupings; it declares that no outside influence may be brought to bear upon it in its day to day action, nationally or internationally.

It reckons that syndicalism must maximise the efforts of the labour unions in order to bring about the destruction of capitalist rule and to carry out the proletarian revolution.

In this revolutionary undertaking, syndicalism, placing the revolution above all system and all theory, declares its readiness to welcome assistance from all other revolutionary forces.”

You heard. Syndicalism declares its readiness to welcome help from all other revolutionary forces. That motion spells out syndicalism’s goal. It is the syndicalism defined in the Amiens motion: self-sufficient syndicalism. a new life organised by the workers themselves, without political grouping, without the State, without coercive force and that particular goal, that goal which is the goal of the minority unions, we will accept help from all revolutionary forces to achieve, but we will not make the union subordinate to any political party. Does that mean, comrades, that there is no political party desirous of bringing the trade union to heel? We all know that since its inception there have always been political parties that have sought to bring it to heel. I can assure you that the dissident socialist party would like nothing better.

And hasn’t the CGT’s syndicalism been subordinate ever since 1914 to all of the political and governmental forces in the land? Comrades have demonstrated this to you already and I shall not labour the point.

I should like to state, also, that certainly in the new Communist Party there are lots of folk who would like to bring this country’s syndicalism to heel, but I must add, having been present at the minority Congress over several days, that my syndicalist comrades from this country will not allow syndicalism to be subordinated to the new communist socialist party. It is because I have confidence in them, confidence that they will stick by the resolution, that I, who am only too well aware of the Communist Party’s eagerness to bring syndicalism to heel,

know that syndicalism will never be brought to heel. Well, if an anarchist who was afraid, and may still be afraid, of the political parties' achieving their aims, make that admission to you, or if some comrade like me, worried about our independence should say to you:

“Join us, dump the men at the head of the present CGT, and ensure that there are no personal squabbles between us, only the frictions between tendencies, that there is nothing but honesty and sincerity, and you can be sure that syndicalism will acquire such power that no one will be able to bring it to heel and that we can ensure that it encompasses its aims.”

Comrades, there is much that I should like to say but words do not come easily to me and I am weary and under pressure. However, I do not wish to step down from this rostrum without replying to provocation by one of this morning's speakers.

He was talking about things happening in Russia: he quoted *Le Libertaire* as denouncing the Bolshevik government as having anarchist comrades thrown in prison. True, *Le Libertaire* did just that and has no regrets about it. But *Le Libertaire* said something else too. It has said and I here repeat it that men who acted for seven years as the accomplices of those in government over this country have no right to kick up a stink when revolutionaries have grounds for complaint about abuses in other countries. Jouhaux, who was under-minister of the Interior during the war when there were plenty of pacifists in prison (I was one of them) raised no protest then. So he has no right today to protest if there are anarchist comrades in prison in Russia (Applause).

If my anarchist comrades in Russia could hear me, they could not but endorse me, because they would not wish solidarity from men who have fallen so low into the mire. (Applause).

Le Libertaire 26 August 1921.

Biographical Milestones

30 September 1888: Louis Lecoin born in Saint-Amand-Montrond (Cher department)

1901: completes primary school certificate

1904: gains diploma in agriculture

1905: “goes up” to Paris.

1 May 1906: arrested for the first time

1907: arrested during a gardeners’ strike. Sentenced to three months in prison.

December 1907: drafted into the 85th Infantry in Cosne.

17 October 1910: refuses to take action against a rail strike.

November 1910: sentenced to six months in prison by a court martial.

March 1912: Lecoin joins the Anarchist Communist Federation (FCA).

October 1912: elected secretary of the FCA.

15 November 1912: arrested as publisher of an anti-militarist poster.

19 December 1912: sentenced to a five year prison term.

November 1916: released from prison.

7 December 1916: prints a handbill entitled “Let’s impose peace”.

11 December 1916: arrested for distribution of unlawful tracts.

September 1917: upon release, he refuses to report to his army unit.

December 1917: sentenced to five years as a draft-dodger, plus eighteen months for seditious talk.

November 1920: released.

December 1920: becomes administrator with Le Libertaire.

August 1921: represents the construction workers at the CGT congress.

June 1922: delegate to the CGTU congress.

1922: Lecoin sets up home with Marie Morand.

June 1924: birth of Josette, only daughter of Louis Lecoin and Marie Morand.

October 1926: launches campaign in France to save Sacco and Vanzetti.

1928: becomes a proof-reader.

April 1931: first visit to Spain.

October 1936: launches the Free Spain Committee (CEL).

17 October 1937: Lecoin and Marie Morand marry.

November 1937: founds International Antifascist Solidarity (SIA).

September 1939: collects signatures for a manifesto against the war. Arrested.

February 1941: still a prisoner, he is transferred to Algeria.

August 1941: released.

1945: retires as a proof-reader.

1947: publication of his first autobiography *De prison en prison*.

October 1948: launches the magazine *Défense de l'homme*.

July 1955: leaves *Défense de l'homme*.

29 December 1956: death of Marie Morand.

31 January 1958: Lecoin launches *Liberté* and begins his campaign for conscientious objection.

1 June-22 June 1962: hunger strike to press for recognition of conscientious objector status.

11 December 1963: conscientious objector status recognised by law.

1964 and 1966: nominated for Nobel Peace Prize.

October 1965: second biography published, *Le cours d'une vie*.

December 1967: Lecoin founds the Committee for the Abolition of War.

June 1971: death of Louis Lecoin.